

Medical Malpractice: The Disaster of 1898 and the Iron Surgeon in Spain

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“Doctors of politics and family physicians will undoubtedly study the evil [of caciques]; they will discuss its origins, their classification, and their remedies; but the most alien to science who pays any attention to Public Affairs observes this singular state of Spain: wherever tact is applied, it does not find the pulse” - Francisco Silvela, 1898.¹⁰⁵

The Spanish-American War is one of the most forgotten conflicts in American history. That is not the case in Spain. The effects of the war would shake Spain to the core and forever change its trajectory. After the loss of most of the Spanish Empire, a new political and literary movement known as the generation of '98 would arise. This movement reacted to the chaotic state of post-war Spanish politics in a variety of ways. Perhaps the most notable of these reactions was conservative writer and political thinker Jaquin Costa's conception of the Iron Surgeon, a hypothetical figure who would sweep in and take dictatorial power to repair the Spanish state. This concept formed the bedrock of Spanish nationalism for years to come and even inspired several would-be doctors. The varied reactions of the generation of '98 would define Spanish politics for the next half-century.

Firstly, the generation of '98 was the name given to a collection of Spanish writers, politicians, and other thinkers that emerged in the wake of the Spanish-American War. To understand the generation of '98, one must understand the ongoing geopolitical situation in Spain. On paper, Spain was a constitutional monarchy with a democratically elected congress, called the Cortes, but this was not actually the case due to widespread and open corruption. Not only did the king have the power to force any administration to resign and choose their replacements, but the Cortes was packed with power-trading bureaucrats who swapped with each other every electoral cycle, with no real competition amongst political parties.¹⁰⁶ Under typical conditions, the king appointed a governor, or power transitioned to the other party. These actions, which were themselves predetermined, were followed by the Minister of the Interior's call for local powerbrokers and their apparatuses (caciques) to “fix” the election. Votes would then be falsified on the local and federal levels, ensuring victory for whoever's turn it was to hold power.¹⁰⁷ Consistent displays of military force, local violence, and intimidation sustained this system. The illustration below, published by *El Cardo*, a Spanish satirical magazine, indicates the apathetic popular reaction against Spain's electoral system.¹⁰⁸ This image depicts a civil guard standing in front of a polling house. A dog is seen urinating

¹⁰⁵ Francisco Silvela, "España Sin Pulso," *El Tiempo*, August 16, 189

¹⁰⁶ Paul Preston, *A People Betrayed: A History of Corruption, Political Incompetence and Social Division in Modern Spain* (Oxford: HarperCollins Publishers Ltd., 2020), 27.

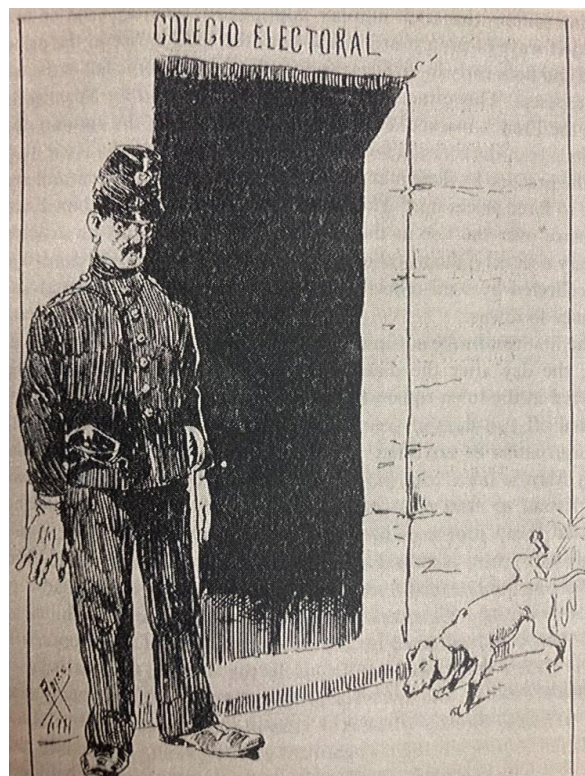
¹⁰⁷ José V. Ortega, "Aftermath of Splendid Disaster: Spanish Politics before and after the Spanish American War of 1898," *Journal of Contemporary History* 15, no. 2 (1980)

¹⁰⁸ "Las Elecciones," *El Cardo*, 19 Sept. 1898. (Image Scanned from source on footnote 10, page 105)

on the doorway. The caption states, “Thank god someone’s turned up!” This comic illustrates the widespread attitude of apathy in Spain: the elections were so thoroughly falsified that hardly anyone bothered to vote. This satire is something most Spaniards could find relatable, as historian Paul Preston describes:

“Excluded from organized politics, the hungry masses could choose only between apathy and violence. Their apathy allowed the local authorities to fabricate the results without too much opposition. Violent resistance guaranteed arrest, torture, and perhaps execution.”¹⁰⁹

However, this apathetic atmosphere was beginning to change by 1891. Although the caciques worked best in rural areas, where it was easy to falsify elections, in industrialized areas, it was much harder to fudge elections or intimidate voters due to larger turnout and growing independent political groups like unions by the 1910s. With growing industrialization, electoral power began to shift away from local bosses and started to rely more upon popular sovereignty.¹¹⁰ Gerrymandering and corruption stymied this, as well as the already broken constitution, but there was enough democratic pressure to force the stagnant parties to become more radical.¹¹¹ Emerging socialist and anarchist groups put further pressure on the system. This confluence of an intentionally flawed Cortez, combined with cracks in the already flawed system of power, brewed the perfect storm for the governing system to fall apart.



¹⁰⁹ Preston, “People Betrayed”, 27

¹¹⁰ Ibid

¹¹¹ Preston, “People Betrayed”, 57

The Spanish-American War of 1898, during which the Spanish military was soundly defeated in repeated engagements with Americans, Cubans, and Filipinos, was the thunderous wake-up call to the state of Spanish society. To summarize the conduct of the war, the Spanish army and armada were soundly defeated in repeated engagements with Americans, Cubans, and Filipinos. Many within the generation of '98, such as Costa, blamed the incompetent government for this failure. Before the war, observers within Spain thought the nation to be worthy of international respect. The loss in 1898 ruined that self-conception, because the mass of what remained of the Spanish Empire was greatly reduced. Already shrunken compared to its height in the early 1700s, the war caused some of Spain's last overseas territories to finally vanish from the map.¹¹²¹¹³ One can easily identify that, in the course of a few months, Spain went from a smaller but still substantial empire that spanned the globe to merely most of Iberia and a few middling islands off the coast: A drastic visual change that soured the hearts of many nationalists and imperialists. The economic consequences of losing these lands were significant:

“The disaster exposed as a terrible delusion the belief that Spain was at least a middle-ranking world power, a belief that was a central component of the national culture. The loss of the last remnants of the Empire provoked a severe post-imperial crisis among sections of Spanish society... Spain's political system, its national character, and Spanish nationhood itself fell into question.”¹¹⁴

All segments of the regime began to lose their luster, beyond military failure. Pointedly, that spring, Lord Salisbury, a respected British statesman and Conservative politician, delivered his famed “Living and Dying Nations” speech in London, commenting on the Spanish-American War as an inevitability; a living nation, the US, eating the remains of a dying nation, Spain.¹¹⁵ This speech foretold a long series of disasters and political shake-ups in Spain that created the Generation of '98, a group of thinkers that sought to destroy the caciques and replace them with a superior system. They disagreed, however, on what that replacement was to be.

The regenerationist movement, led by a group of thinkers known as the Generation of '98, was one such movement that rose out of this national morass. Beginning in 1898, the movement would remain in its heyday until concerns regarding Spanish societal stability weakened with the economic prosperity of the First World War. Regenerationism was not a dictatorial movement at its inception:

“Despite superficial similarities to the 1930s and 1940s authoritarian jargon, neither the intelligentsia (the 'generation of '98) nor the movement of popular protest organized by the Chambers of Commerce, were advocating such a philosophy. The

¹¹² Edward Stanford, "The Cyclopaedia or Atlas of General Maps Published under the Superintendence of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge with an Index to the Principal Places in the World," Library of Congress, 1867.

¹¹³ James McConnell, "McConnell's historical maps of the United States, The Spanish-American War, 1898," The Library of Congress, 1919.

¹¹⁴ Sebastian Balfour, *The End of the Spanish Empire, 1898-1923* (Oxford: OUP Oxford, 1997), 49.

¹¹⁵ "LORD SALISBURY ON THE NATIONS," *New Zealand Herald*, June 11, 1898, 3.

constant attacks on politics, politicians, parliament, political parties, and elections, are no proof that there was a search for an authoritarian solution but rather struck at defects of the system from the standpoint of its own ideals.”¹¹⁶

The original generation of ‘98, the philosophical leaders of Regenerationism, was a wide confluence of poets, writers, politicians, and activists who held a wide swath of views.¹¹⁷ Scholars debate whether the generation of ‘98 was as solid a body as is often assumed. Broadly, though, the generation of ‘98 was a literary and political movement that questioned the state of Spanish democracy and government. Certainly, when viewed through the lens of literature, the generation of ‘98 had diverse stylings and political opinions.¹¹⁸ However, confining the definition of the generation within a literary standard and not a political one, overlooks the main goals of the movement. Additionally, keep in mind that the generation of ‘98 was merely a set of influential individuals whose writings would come to define regenerationism as a movement. The inspiration is not synonymous with the resulting whole.¹¹⁹

Regenerationists held largely similar beliefs about what was wrong within Spain and what was to be achieved. They believed that the caciques' system was rotten to the core and had to be replaced. Regenerationists differed strongly on the political means they pursued to achieve their goals of dismantling the caciques, overhauling the democratic system, investing in public works, and reforming education.¹²⁰ It largely broke into three sections: The Maurists, the Socialists, and the followers of Costa. Costa believed in a figure called the Iron Surgeon, an entirely new conception of dictator that he elaborated on in his monumental essays on the subject. These two alternatives to the Iron Surgeon are vital to touch upon, as it is difficult to capture how attractive the idea of this kind of dictator would be to Costa, and much of Spain, without discussing the other options that existed. It must be made clear how appealing that concept would have been to large segments of Spanish society. Maura, broadly, represented the bourgeois intellectualism of the generation of ‘98, which phrased regenerationism in a very patronizing way of having the intellectual class reform the government for the benefit of the unwashed masses.¹²¹ Maura's government, having taken power in 1907, used violent repression and consistently despised tactics to crack down on rebellion. He was broadly seen as ineffective and not conducive to systemic change. Maura believed in a “revolution from above”, but reflecting upon the man some time later, his generation of ‘98 peer Miguel de Unamuno stated:

¹¹⁶ Ortega, "Splendid Disaster," 326

¹¹⁷ Antonio Machado, *Campos de Castilla* (Madrid: Biblioteca Virtual Miguel de Cervantes, 1912)

¹¹⁸ Phyllis Z. Boring, "A TEMPORAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE GENERATION OF 1898," *Romance Notes* 16, no. 2 (1975)

¹¹⁹ Ortega, "Splendid Disaster."

¹²⁰ Sebastian Balfour, "Riot, regeneration and reaction: Spain in the aftermath of the 1898 Disaster," *The Historical Journal* 38, no. 2 (1995)

¹²¹ Miguel D. Unamuno et al., *Short Stories by the Generation of 1898/Cuentos de la Generación de 1898: A Dual-Language Book* (North Chelmsford: Courier Corporation, 2014)

“Maura is a man of words and a lawyer. Very sincere and honorable but a lawyer concerned to prove an alibi. And even when he spoke of the rapid and radical revolution from above, he was [merely] coining... another phrase”¹²²

More pointedly, Maura wanted to avoid republicanism at all costs: he was a conservative and wanted to retain the monarchy, believing that the Cortes must undergo dramatic change only for the sake of preventing the downfall of the king.¹²³ Maura and his supporters had prescient concerns, though, because socialism and its associated terrorism were on the rise.

The socialists saw Maura’s reforms as useless because they sustained a corrupt system, and they disagreed with Costa’s advocacy for a dictator. Socialist leader Manuel Azaña reflected upon this situation:

“The Restoration proscribes the examination of the realities of the Spanish body; it could not progress within its lines and was condemned to sterility; or if it did progress, it was headed straight for its own destruction.”¹²⁴

Led by a variety of figures, such as leftist Pablo Iglesias, the above-mentioned Manuel Azaña, and inflammatory journalist Alejandro Lerroux, the Spanish left was quickly organizing. A large number of Spaniards began to join several different left-wing parties and associations with a variety of views. Many of these groups engaged in terrorism. Perhaps the most legendary was the La Mano Negra, an illusory group blamed for bombings and murders all over Spain. Whether they existed or not, the terror was real, and was being stoked by figures on the left, like Lerroux:

“Young barbarians today, enter and sack the decadent and miserable civilization of this unhappy country, destroy its temples, finish off its gods, lift the veil of the novice nuns, and raise them up to the status of mothers to make the species more virile. Break into the property registries and make bonfires of its papers that fire might purify the odious social organization.”¹²⁵

Spain had been rocked with terror attacks by anarchist individuals for years, and despite the vast majority of the left not being complicit (excepting figures like Lerroux), they were characterized by terror. So, while Maura represented a facelift of the violent status quo, the left was represented by bomb throwers and arsonists, no matter their actual intentions.¹²⁶ This was a poor mixture that caused Costa and his auxiliaries to seek a third option.

Perhaps the most notable and most interesting of the generation of ‘98 was Joaquin Costa and his dictatorial concept of the Iron Surgeon. Costa saw the failures of the caciques and the failures of alternative democracy (Maurists and Socialists) and designed a third option: The Iron Surgeon. He builds upon this idea in his monumental work “Oligarchy and Caciquism as the Current Form of Government in Spain: Urgency and how to Change it”. This work formed not just the basis of his third of the regenerationism movement, but also for the future dictatorship of

¹²² Balfour, “End of Spanish Empire, 204

¹²³ Preston, “People Betrayed”

¹²⁴ Manuel Azaña, “Tres generaciones del Ateneo” (lecture, Opening session of the academic year, Ateneo de Madrid, November 20, 1930).

¹²⁵ Preston, “People Betrayed” 73

¹²⁶ Balfour, “End of Spanish Empire, 204

Primo de Rivera. It would also become the bedrock of 20th-century fascist thought, cementing its importance to the regeneration movement and to authoritarianism as a whole in the eyes of historians. Costa spends the first few pages of this work discussing the caciques' system and its problems, summarizing it with a quote from his colleague Gumersindo de Azcárate:

“There you have a full-length portrait of the cacique, the true master of Spain, the Catherine Wheel of its Constitution: Was Azcárate exaggerating when he defined caciquism as ‘a new kind of feudalism, a hundred times more repugnant than the warrior feudalism of the Middle Ages?’”¹²⁷

As discussed above, the regenerationists were almost in universal agreement on the issues of the caciques. What makes Costa unique is his solutions is his refutation, in chapter two, of the legalistic “within the system” approach of the more tepid regenerationists and those who wished to fundamentally preserve the Cortes, such as Maura. Costa indeed believes that a fundamentally corrupt system cannot be fixed from the inside:

“A sick social state cannot be cured by a law: the evils born from the distortion or deficiencies of the will can only be remedied by healing or educating the will; external guarantees and combinations are only effective as auxiliaries to that ethical, dynamic action, and in function of it.”²⁴

Instead, he uses the metaphor of Spain being a sick and dying nation that needs a swift and decisive recovery that can only be performed by a skilled individual. Thus creating the fascistic concept of the Iron Surgeon through this metaphor:

“The cacique must be repressed or [removed], I repeat, by means of external coercion, as a cancer or a tumor is [removed], and at the same time the vitiated blood of the social body that produced it must be purified, so that it does not re-emerge.... To cure Spain of the cacique... supposes two different things: a surgical operation, with an almost instantaneous effect, and a medical treatment, with a slow and gradual [recovery].”¹²⁸

Who is the Iron Surgeon in geopolitical terms? Costa makes a compelling metaphor of a surgeon taking swift and decisive action to remove a tumor, but how does that manifest in real politics? Costa reiterates his desire for immediate change to avoid cataclysm. To this end, his Surgeon would require the ability to make changes unquestioned. They must also have an undying love for the country and shape it without corruption. Only via swift, dedicated action of an individual can Spain be saved, and this kind of change necessitates a dictator.

“This ruler, this liberator, who is to lead the nation out of the captivity in which it groans and disenchant liberty... must personally guarantee the effectiveness of the law; he must put himself in the place of [ineffective democracy.] That is what it all comes down to: he must cut with his own hand the bonds that oppress the law, and with the law... he must become the soul of the nation, by virtue of having become one with it.”¹²⁹

¹²⁷Joaquín Costa, *Oligarquía y caciquismo: como la forma actual de gobierno en España : urgencia y modo de cambiarla* (Madrid: Biblioteca Virtual Miguel de Cervantes, 1901), II,5.

¹²⁸ Costa, “Oligarquía y caciquismo”, II,2.

¹²⁹ Costa, “Oligarquía y caciquismo”, II,4.

In this way, the dictator must be synonymous with the state and operate it personally. A dictator with absolute power is required. This power is needed both over the laws of the nation and the minds of its people. To create this power, the Cortes must be abolished entirely. Furthermore, Costa contends that democratic systems hastened the disaster of 1898, repeatedly citing the inefficiencies of democratic systems. This view was shared by many of his contemporaries, such as psychologist Rafael Altamira and politician Francisco Silvela.¹³⁰ Costa then introduces an interesting quality to the Surgeon: his eventual absence. Costa alleges that once this work is completed, the dictator must abdicate in favor of a rebuilt Cortes of strong leaders that is more beneficial to the people, with Costa stating: “The government ‘of the worst’ is replaced by that ‘of the best.’”¹³¹

Costa included an addendum published in 1901 to his original 1898 work, and this three-chapter version was the version most widely known at the time. In this chapter, Costa engages in rebuttals against common detractions to his original work. Perhaps most interesting is the section titled “Surgical politics has nothing in common with dictatorship and is compatible with the parliamentary regime”, in which he tries to defend the fascistic idea of the Iron Surgeon and separate it from the ideas of despotism of the time. (Note that the title of this section alone is incompatible with the phrasing of sections in chapter two.) In this section, he argues the components that make the Iron Surgeon truly different from period conceptions of feudal totalitarianism, thereby crafting a grave precursor to 20th-century fascism.¹³² Costa separates his Iron Surgeon from a dictator, stating that while a dictator simply seizes the nation, the Iron Surgeon *becomes* the nation. Rather than operating state apparatuses, all apparatuses of the state must operate around the surgeon, basing their very function upon the ideology of the Surgeon.

“The dictator... substitutes himself in place of all the Magistracies; Nothing more, the “iron surgeon” serves as an adjective complement according to the Constitution: he makes the laws govern, the Administration administer, the governor govern, the teacher educate, the inspector inspect... Police of the Police, watches over those in charge of watching; makes up for the deficiencies of all these organs with decrees and action,”¹³³

The Surgeon not only operates the state, but the Surgeon is the figure that the state revolves around. This idea makes Costa’s image of the Iron Surgeon unique and specifically prescient to 20th-century fascism. Costa is not describing a mere dictator or monarch, but a whole governmental system revolving around his Iron Surgeon. A variety of figures used this same rhetoric, which became emblematic of fascist political ideology. Clearly, despite Costa’s imagining of the Iron Surgeon as a figure who would sweep in and repair not only the state but the nation with divine action, in reality, this imagined figure would prove to be a self-interested quack.

Years later, these ideas of dictatorship to save Spain would come to fruition during the 1923 coup of Primo de Rivera. While not central to the 1898 conception of the Iron Surgeon, the concept is very rarely discussed without discussing the leaders that would come from it, chiefly,

¹³⁰George L. Vázquez, “Altamira, the Generation of 1898, and the Regeneration of Spain,” *Mediterranean Studies* 5 (1995).

¹³¹ Costa, “Oligarquía y caciquismo”, II,4.

¹³² Raymond Carr, *Modern Spain, 1875-1980* (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1980)

¹³³ Costa, “Oligarquía y caciquismo”, III,9.

Primo de Rivera. The Iron Surgeon was central to the rise of Primo de Rivera. He and others were directly inspired by Costa's work to form and justify their regimes, for Rivera echoed Costa's rhetoric to justify the new change in management.

“The significance of [the coup] has been frequently expressed in medical metaphors for the obvious reason that Primo himself adopted the classic regenerationist image of the Iron Surgeon”¹³⁴

Primo de Rivera echoed Costa's sentiments almost exactly when justifying his government. He used medical language and described himself as the long-awaited Iron surgeon. He combined this rhetoric with that of Mussolini in Italy, who was similarly inspired by Costa, at least in part.¹³⁵ Costa's writings formed the bedrock of ideology and rhetoric on which the most basic tenets of 20th-century fascism were founded. These strong illusions of the Iron Surgeon provided the backbone of justification for his rule. He swiftly gained popular and aristocratic support and even that of the king, in part due to his medical rhetoric. These illusions would only be maintained and strengthened by the Franco regime, which glorified de Rivera and portrayed his reign as Spain's second golden age in Francoist historiography.¹³⁶

Spain is a fascinating case of corruption, ideology, passion, and failure. Despite its terrible corruption and mundane inefficiency, the constitutional monarchy known as the restoration system proved stable. However, the Spanish-American War would prove to be a breaking point. With the loss of prestige, empire, and respect for its institutions, the status quo of restoration Spain was doomed. This fall took 25 years to come to fruition with Primo de Rivera's coup, which, in turn, determined the next 57 years of Spanish political chaos. The critical and constructive political writings of the Generation of '98 facilitated this fall. This is especially true of Costa's ideas, which would go on to inspire the rhetoric of other dictators.¹³⁷ In this way, the outcry finally released by the Spanish-American War was monumental. The faces that represented the regenerationism movement, Maura, Azaña, and Costa, among others, would shape the nation's attitudes for over half a century. This came in the form of the Iron Surgeon, a concept that dominated not only Spain but nationalist sentiments around the world.

¹³⁴ Preston, "People Betrayed" 154.

¹³⁵ Ruth Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities: Italy, 1922-1945* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2004), 18.

¹³⁶ Alejandro Quiroga, "La Gran Guerra De los intelectuales: España en Europa," *Ayer Revista de Historia Contemporánea* 91, no. 3 (2013)

¹³⁷ Ben-Ghiat, *Fascist Modernities*

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